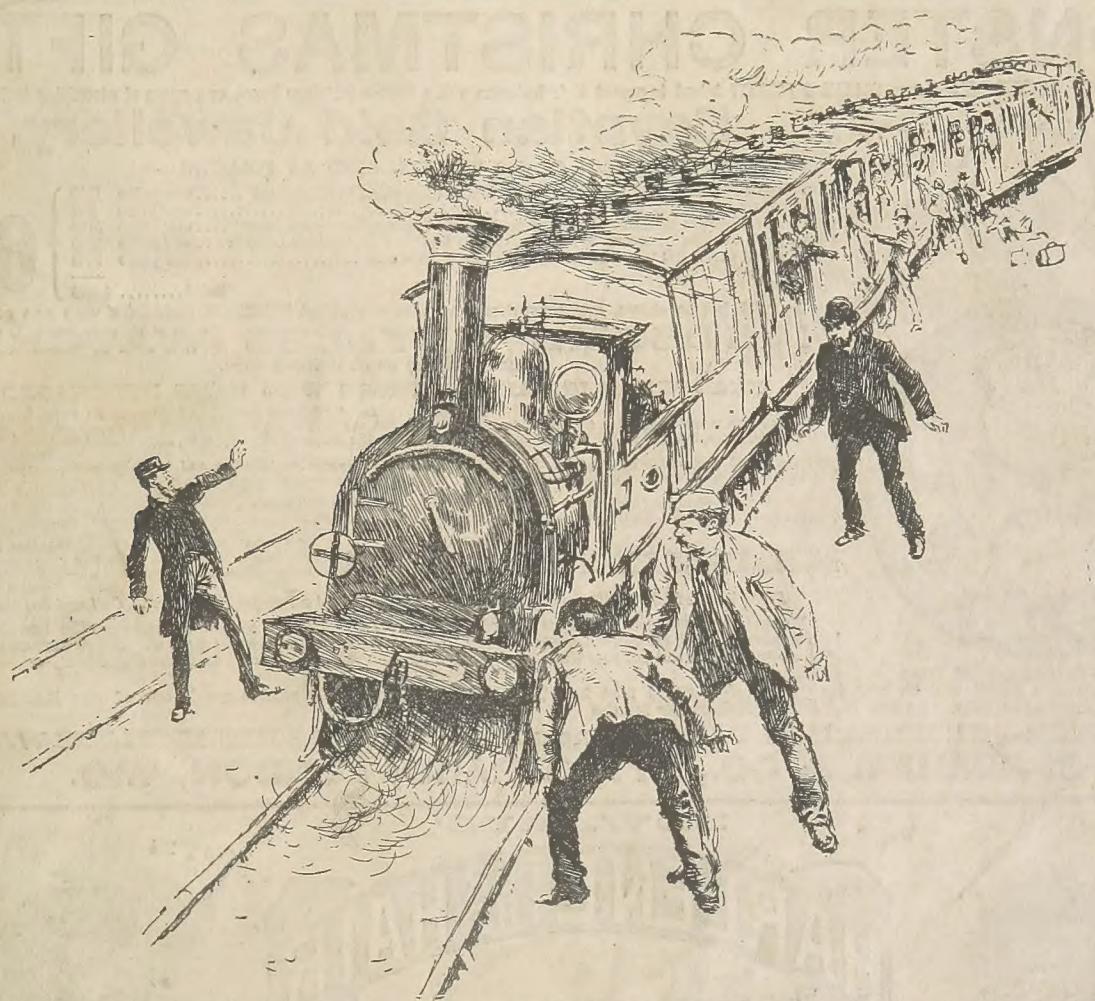


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ILLUSTRATED PENNY TALES.

FROM THE "STRAND" LIBRARY.



No. 1.—CONTAINING:

A DEADLY DILEMMA	By Grant Allen.
SLAP-BANG	By Jules Claretie.
THE MINISTER'S CRIME	By J. Maclaren Cobban.

PUBLISHED AT THE OFFICES OF "TIT-BITS."

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Illustrated Penny Tales.

A Deadly Dilemma.

By Grant Allen.

WHEN Netta Mayne came to think it over afterward in her own room by herself, she couldn't imagine what had made her silly enough to quarrel that evening with Ughtred Carnegie. She could only say, in a penitent mood, it was always the way like that with lovers. Till once they've quarrelled a good round quarrel, and afterwards solemnly kissed and made it all up again, things never stand on a really firm and settled basis between them. It's a move in the game. You must thrust in fierce before you thrust in quarte. The Roman playwright spoke the truth, after all: a lovers' quarrel begins a fresh chapter in the history of their love-making.

It was a summer evening, calm, and clear, and balmy, and Netta and Ughtred had strolled out together, not

without a suspicion at times of hand locked in hand, on the high chalk down that rises steep behind Holmbury. How or why they fell out she hardly knew. But they had been engaged already some months, without a single disagreement, which of course gave Netta a natural right to quarrel with Ughtred by this time, if she thought fit: and as they returned down the hanging path through the combe where the wild orchids grow, she used that right at last, out of pure, unadulterated feminine perversity. The ways of women are wonderful; no mere man can fathom them. Something that Ughtred said gave her the chance to make a half petulant answer. Ughtred very naturally defended himself from the imputation of rudeness, and Netta retorted. At the end of ten minutes the trifle had grown apace into as pretty a lovers' quarrel as any lady novelist could wish to describe in five chapters.

Netta had burst into perfectly orthodox tears, refused to be comforted, in the most approved fashion, declined to accept Ughtred's escort home, and bidden farewell to him excitedly for ever and ever.

It was all about nothing, to be sure, and if two older or wiser heads had only stood by unseen, to view the little comedy, they would sagely have remarked to one another, with a shake, that before twenty-four hours were out the pair would be rushing into one another's arms with mutual apologies and mutual forgiveness. But Netta Mayne and Ughtred Carnegie were still at the age when one takes love seriously—one does before thirty—and so they turned away along different paths at the bottom of the combe, in the firm belief that love's young dream was shattered, and that henceforth they two were nothing more than the merest acquaintances to one another.

"Good-bye, Mr. Carnegie," Netta faltered out, as in obedience to her wishes, though much against his own will, Ughtred turned slowly and remorsefully down the footpath to the right, in the direction of the railway.

"Good-bye, Netta," Ughtred answered, half choking. Even at that moment of parting (for ever—or a day) he couldn't find it in his heart to call her "Miss Mayne" who had so long been "Netta" to him.

He waved his hand and turned along the foot-path, looking back many times to see Netta still sitting inconsolable where he had left her, on the stile that led from the combe into the Four-acre meadow. Both paths, to right and left, led back to Holmbury over the open field, but they diverged rapidly, and crossed the railway track by separate gates, and five hundred yards from each other. A turn in the path, at which Ughtred lingered long, hid Netta at last from his sight. He paused and hesitated. It was growing late, though an hour of summer twilight still remained. He couldn't bear to leave Netta thus alone in the field. She wouldn't allow him to see her home, to be sure, and that being so, he was too much of a gentleman to force himself upon her. But he was too much of a man, too, to let her find her way back so late entirely by herself. Unseen himself, he must still watch over her. Against her will, he must still protect her. He would go on to



"NETTA AND UGHTRED HAD STROLLED OUT TOGETHER."



A DEADLY DILEMMA.



"NETTA WAS STILL SITTING INCONSOLABLE."

the railway, and there sit by the side of the line, under cover of the hedge, till Netta crossed by the other path. Then he'd walk quietly along the six-foot way to the gate she had passed through, and follow her, unperceived, at a distance along the lane, until he saw her back to Holmbury. Whether she wished it or not, he could never leave her.

He looked about for a seat. One lay most handy. By the side of the line the Government engineers had been at work that day, repairing the telegraph system. They had taken down half-a-dozen mouldering old posts, and set up new ones in their places—tall, clean, and shiny. One of the old posts still lay at full length on the ground by the gate, just as the men had left it at the end of their day's work. At the point where the footpath cut the line was a level crossing, and there Ughtred sat down on the fallen post by the side, half-concealed from view by a tall clump of willow-herb, waiting patiently for Netta's coming. How he listened for that light footfall. His heart was full, indeed, of gall and bitterness. He loved her so dearly, and she had treated him so ill. Who would have ever believed that Netta, his Netta, would have thrown him over like that for such a ridiculous trifling? Who, indeed? and least of all Netta herself, sitting alone on the stile with her pretty face bowed deep in her hands, and her poor heart wondering how Ughtred, her Ughtred, could so easily desert her. In such strange ways is the feminine variety of the human heart constructed. To be sure, she had of course dismissed him in the most peremptory fashion, declaring with all the vows propriety permits to the British maiden that she needed no escort of any sort home, and that she would ten thousand times rather go alone than have him accompany her. But, of course, also, she didn't mean it. What woman does? She counted upon a prompt and unconditional surrender. Ughtred would

go to the corner, as in duty bound, and then come back to her, with profuse expressions of penitence for the wrong he had never done, to make it all up again in the orthodox fashion. She never intended the real tragedy that was so soon to follow. She was only playing with her victim—only trying, woman like, her power over Ughtred.

So she sat there still, and cried and cried on, minute after minute, in an ecstasy of misery, till the sunset began to glow deeper red in the western sky, and the bell to ring the curfew in Holmbury Tower. Then it dawned upon her slowly, with a shock of surprise, that after all—incredible! impossible!—Ughtred had positively taken her at her word, and wasn't coming back at all to-night to her.

At that, the usual womanly terror seized upon her soul. Her heart turned faint. This was too terrible. Great heavens, what had she done? Had she tried Ughtred too far, and had he really gone? Was he never going to return to her at all? Had he said goodbye in earnest to her for ever and ever?

Terrified at the thought, and weak with crying, she rose and straggled down the narrow footpath towards the further crossing. It was getting late now, and Netta by this time was really frightened. She wished with all her heart she hadn't sent away Ughtred—if it were



"SHE CRIED AND CRIED."

only for the tramps: man is such a comfort. And then there was that dreadful dog at Milton Court to pass. And Ughtred was gone, and all the world was desolate.

Thinking these things in a tumult of fear to herself, she staggered along the path, feeling tired at heart, and positively ill with remorse and terror. The colour had

faded now out of her pretty red cheeks. Her eyes were dim and swollen with crying. She was almost half glad Ughtred couldn't see her just then, she was such a fright with her long spell of brooding. Even her bright print dress and her straw hat with the poppies in it, couldn't redeem, she felt sure, her pallor and her wretchedness. But Ughtred was gone, and the world was a wilderness. And he would never come back, and the dog at Milton Court was so vicious.

As she walked, or rather groped her way (for she couldn't see for crying) down the path by the hedge, at every step she grew fainter and fainter. Ughtred was gone; and the world was a blank; and there were tramps and dogs; and it was getting dark; and she loved him so much; and mamma would be so angry.

Turning over which thoughts with a whirling brain, for she was but a girl after all, she reached the little swing-gate that led to the railway, and pushed it aside with vague, numbed hands, and stood gazing vacantly at the long curved line in front of her.

Suddenly a noise rose sharp in the field behind her. It was only a colt, to be sure, disturbed by her approach, dashing wildly across his paddock, as is the way with young horseflesh. But to Netta it came as an indefinite terror, magnified ten thousand-fold by her excited feelings. She made a frenzied dash for the other side of the railway. What it was she knew not, but it was, or might be, anything, everything—mad bulls, drunken men, footpads, vagabonds, murderers.

Oh, how could Ughtred ever have taken her at her word, and left her like this, alone, and in the evening? It was cruel, it was wicked of him; she hated to be disloyal, and yet she felt in her heart it was almost unmanly.

As she rushed along wildly, at the top of her speed, her little foot caught on the first rail. Before she knew what had happened, she had fallen with her body right across the line. Faint and terrified already, with a thousand vague alarms, the sudden shock stunned and disabled her. Mad bull or drunken man, they might do as they liked now. She was bruised and shaken. She had no thought left to rise or recover herself. Her eyes closed heavily. She lost consciousness at once. It was a terrible position. She had fainted on the line, with the force of the situation.

As for Ughtred, from his seat on the telegraph post on the side of the line five hundred yards farther up, he saw her pause by the gate, then dash across the road,

then stumble and trip, then fall heavily forward. His heart came up into his mouth at once at the sight. Oh, thank Heaven he had waited. Thank Heaven he was near. She had fallen across the line, and a train might come along before she could rise up again. She seemed hurt, too. In a frenzy of suspense he darted forward to save her.

It took but a second for him to realize that she had fallen, and was seriously hurt, but in the course of that second, even as he realized it all, another and more pressing terror seized him.

Hark! what was that? He listened and thrilled. Oh, no, too terrible. Yes, yes, it must be—the railway, the railway! He knew it. He felt it. Along the up line, on which Netta was lying, he heard behind him—oh, unmistakable, unthinkable!—the fierce whirr of the express dashing madly down upon him. Great heavens, what could he do? The train was coming, the train was almost this moment upon them. Before he could have time to rush wildly forward and snatch Netta from where she lay, full in its path, a helpless weight, it would have swept past him resistlessly, and borne down upon her like lightning.

The express was coming—to crush Netta to pieces.

In these awful moments men don't think; they don't reason; they don't even realize what their action means; they simply act, and act instinctively. Ughtred felt in a second, without even consciously feeling it, so to speak, that any attempt to reach Netta now before that devouring engine had burst upon her at full speed would be absolutely hopeless.

His one chance lay in stopping the train somehow. How, or where, or with what, he cared not. His own body would do it if nothing else came. Only stop it, stop it. He didn't think of it at all that moment as a set of carriages containing a precious freight of human lives. He thought of it only as a horrible, cruel, devouring creature, rushing headway on at full speed to Netta's destruction. It was a senseless wild beast, to be combated at all hazards. It was a hideous, ruthless, relentless thing, to be checked in its mad career in no matter what fashion. All he knew, indeed, was that Netta, his Netta, lay helpless on the track, and that the engine, like some madman, puffing and snorting with wild glee and savage exultation, was hastening forward with fierce strides to crush and mangle her.

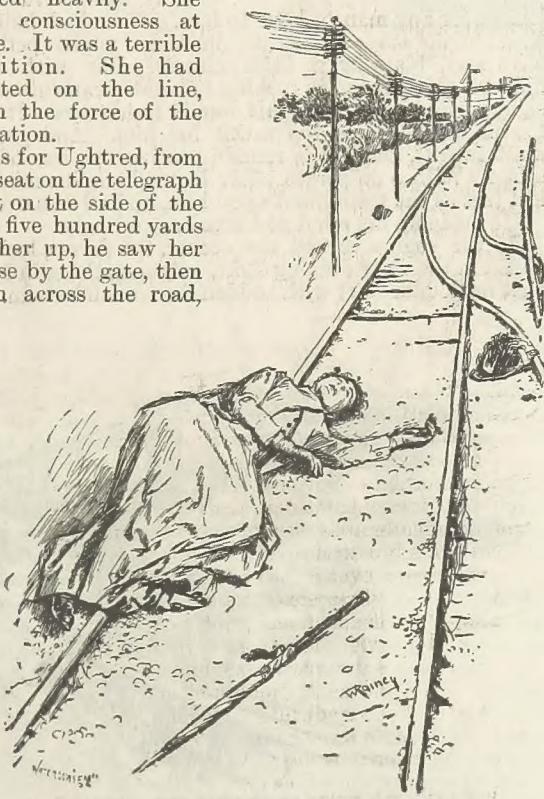
At any risk he must stop it—with anything—anyhow.

As he gazed around him, horror-struck, with blank inquiring stare, and with this one fixed idea possessing his whole soul, Ughtred's eye happened to fall upon the dismantled telegraph post, on which but one minute before he had been sitting. The sight inspired him. Ha, ha! a glorious chance. He could lift it on the line. He could lay it across the rails. He could turn it round into place. He could upset the train! He could place it in the way of that murderous engine.

No sooner thought than done. With the wild energy of despair, the young man lifted the small end of the ponderous post bodily up in his arms, and twisting it on the big base as on an earth-fast pivot, managed by main force and with a violent effort to lay it at last full in front of the advancing locomotive. How he did it he never rightly knew himself, for the weight of the great balk was simply enormous. But horror and love, and the awful idea that Netta's life was at stake, seemed to supply him at once with unwonted energy. He lifted it in his arms as he would have lifted a child, and straining in every limb stretched it at last full across both rails, a formidable obstacle before the approaching engine.

Hurrah! hurrah! he had succeeded now. It would throw the train off the line—and Netta would be saved for him.

To think and do all this under the spur of the circumstances took Ughtred something less than twenty seconds. In a great crisis men live rapidly. It was quick as thought. And at the end of it all he saw the big log laid right across the line with infinite satisfaction.



"IT WAS A TERRIBLE POSITION."

A DEADLY DILEMMA.

Such a splendid obstacle that—so round and heavy ! It must throw the train clean off the metals ! It must produce a fine, first-class catastrophe.

As he thought it, half aloud, a sharp curve brought the train round the corner close to where he stood, great drops of sweat now oozing clammy from every pore with his exertion. He looked at it languidly, with some vague, dim sense of a duty accomplished, and a great work well done for Netta and humanity. There would be a real live accident in a moment now—a splendid accident—a first-rate catastrophe !

Great heavens ! An accident !

And then, with a sudden burst of inspiration, the other side of the transaction flashed in one electric spark upon Ughtred's brain. Why—this—was murder ! There were *people* in that train—innocent human beings, men and women like himself, who would next minute be wrecked and mangled corpses, or writhing forms, on the track before him ! He was guilty of a crime—an awful crime. He was trying to produce a startling, terrible, ghastly railway accident !

Till that second, the idea had never even so much as occurred to him. In the first wild flush of horror at Netta's situation, he had thought of nothing except how best to save her. He had regarded the engine only as a hateful, cruel, destructive living being. He had forgotten the passengers, the stoker, the officials. He had been conscious only of Netta and of that awful thing, breathing flame and steam, that was rushing on to destroy her. For another indivisible second of time Ughtred Carnegie's soul was the theatre of a terrible and appalling struggle. What on earth was he to do ? Which of the two was he to sacrifice ? Should it be murder or treachery ? Must he wreck the train or let it mangle Netta ? The sweat stood upon his brow in great clammy drops at that dread dilemma. It was an awful question for any man to solve. He shrank aghast before that deadly decision.

They were innocent, to be sure, the people in that train. They were unknown men, women, and children. They had the same right to their lives as Netta herself. It was crime, sheer crime, thus to seek to destroy them. But still—what would you have ? Netta lay there all helpless on the line—his own dear Netta. And she had parted from him in anger but half an hour since. Could he leave her to be destroyed by that hideous, snorting, puffing thing ? Has not any man the right to try and save the lives he loves best, no matter at what risk or peril to others ? He asked himself this question, too, vaguely, instinctively, with the rapid haste of a life-and-death struggle ; asked himself with horror, for he had no strength left now to do one thing or the other—to remove the obstacle from the place where he had laid it or to warn the driver. One second alone remained, and then all would be over. On it came, roaring, flaring, glaring, with its great bulls'eyes now peering red round the corner—a terrible, fiery dragon, relentless, unconscious, bearing down in mad glee upon the pole—or Netta.

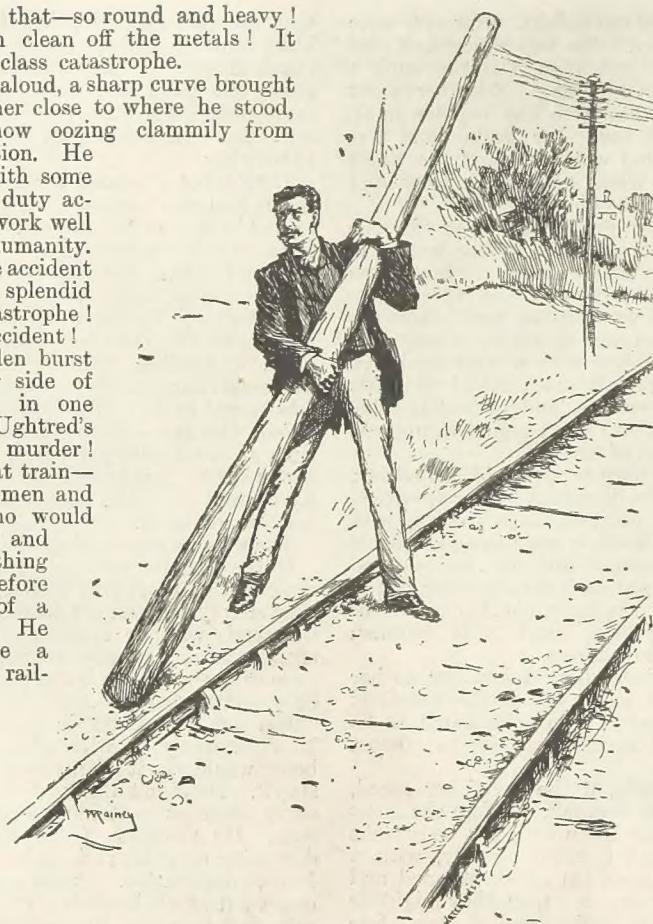
Which of the two should it be—the pole or Netta ?

And still he waited ; and still he temporized. What—what could he do ? Oh, Heaven ! be merciful. Even as the engine swept, snorting and puffing steam, round the corner, he doubted yet—he doubted and temporized. He reasoned with his own conscience in the quick shorthand of thought. So far as intent was concerned he was guiltless. It wouldn't be a murder of malice prepense. When he laid that log there in the way of the train, he never believed—nay, never even knew—it was a train with a living freight of men and women he was trying to imperil. He felt to it merely as a mad engine unattached. He realized only Netta's pressing danger. Was he bound now to undo what he had innocently done—and leave Netta to perish ? Must he take away the post and be Netta's murderer ?

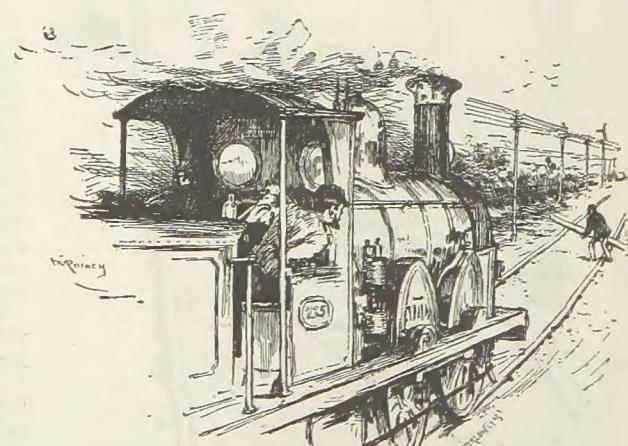
It was a cruel dilemma for any man to have to face. If he had half an hour to debate and decide, now, he might perhaps have seen his way a little clearer. But with that hideous thing actually rushing red and wrathful on his sight—why—he clapped his hands to his ears. It was too much for him—too much for him. And yet he must face it, and act or remain passive, one way or the other. With a desperate effort he made up his mind at last just as the train burst upon him, and all was over.

He made up his mind and acted accordingly.

As the engine turned the corner, the driver, looking ahead in the clear evening light, saw something in front that made him start with sudden horror and alarm. A



"IT WOULD THROW THE TRAIN OFF THE LINE."



"THE DRIVER'S HEART STOOD STILL WITH TERROR."

telegraph pole lay stretched at full length, and a man, unknown, stood agonized by its side, stooping down as he thought to catch and move it. There was no time left to stop her now ; no time to avert the threatened catastrophe. All the driver could do in his haste was to put the brake on hard and endeavour to lessen the force of the inevitable concussion. But even as he looked and wondered at the sight, putting on the brake, meanwhile, with all his might and main, he saw the man in front perform, to his surprise, a heroic action. Rushing full upon the line, straight before the very lights of the advancing train, the man unknown lifted up the pole by main force, and brandishing its end, as it were, wildly in the driver's face, hurled the huge balk back with a terrible effort to the side of the railway. It fell with a crash, and the man fell with it. There was a second's pause, while the driver's heart stood still with terror. Then a jar—a thud—a deep scratch into the soil. A wheel was off the line ; they had met with an accident.

For a moment or two the driver only knew that he was shaken and hurt, but not severely. The engine had

Netta was killed, he didn't know himself how he could ever outlive it.

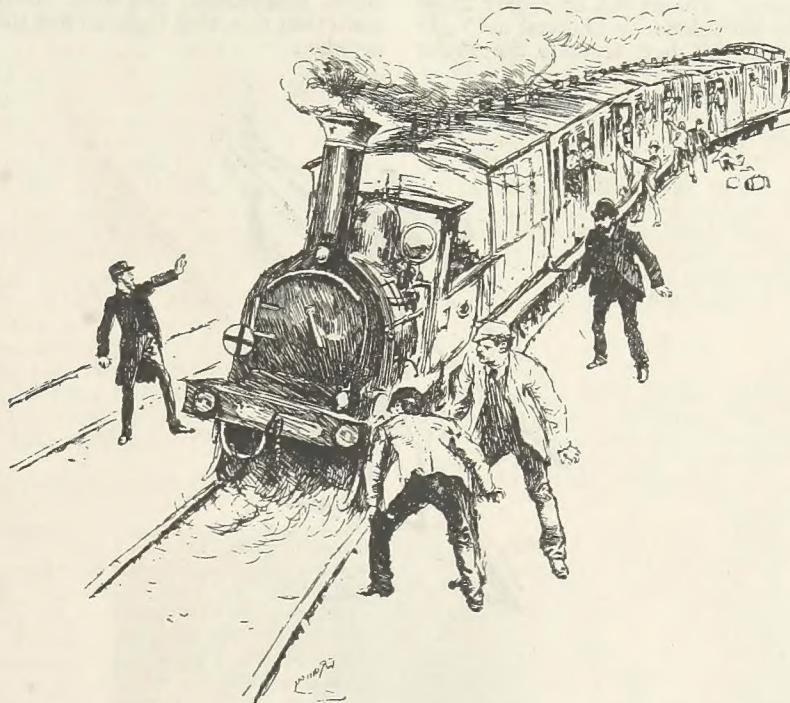
He prayed with all his heart that the train might kill him.

The guard and the driver ran hastily along the train. Nobody was hurt, though many were shaken or slightly bruised. Even the carriages had escaped with a few small cracks. The Holmbury smash was nothing very serious.

But the man with the pole ? Their preserver, their friend ! Where was he all this time ? What on earth had become of him ?

They looked along the line. They searched the track in vain. He had disappeared as if by magic. Not a trace could be found of him.

After looking long and uselessly, again and again, the guard and the driver both gave it up. They had seen the man distinctly—not a doubt about that—and so had several of the passengers as well. But no sign of blood was to be discovered along the track. The mysterious being who, as they all believed, risked his



"THE HOLMBURY SMASH."

left the track, and the carriages lay behind slightly shattered. He could see how it happened. Part of the pole in falling had rebounded on to the line. The base of the great timber had struck the near-side wheel, and sent it off the track in a vain effort to surmount it. But the brake had already slackened the pace and broken the force of the shock, so the visible damage was very inconsiderable. They must look along the carriages and find out who was hurt. And above all things, what had become of the man who had so nobly rescued them ? For the very last thing the engine-driver had seen of Ughtred as the train stopped short was that the man who flung the pole from the track before the advancing engine was knocked down by its approach, while the train to all appearance passed bodily over him. For good or evil, Ughtred had made his decision at last at the risk of his own life. As the train dashed on, with its living freight aboard, his native instinct of preserving life got the better of him in spite of himself. He couldn't let those innocent souls die by his own act — though if he removed the pole, and

own life to save theirs, had vanished as he had come, one might almost say by a miracle.

And indeed, as a matter of fact, when Ughtred Carnegie fell on the track before the advancing engine, he thought for a moment it was all up with him. He was glad of that, too ; for he had murdered Netta. He had saved the train, but he had murdered Netta. It would dash on, now, unresisted, and crush his darling to death. It was better he should die, having murdered Netta. So he closed his eyes tight and waited for it to kill him.

But the train passed on, jarring and scraping, partly with the action of the brake, though partly, too, with the wheel digging into the ground at the side ; it passed on and went over him altogether, coming, as it did so, to a sudden standstill. As it stopped, a fierce joy rose uppermost in Ughtred's soul. Thank Heaven, all was well. He breathed once more easily. He had fallen on his back across the sleepers in the middle of the track. It was not really the train that had knocked him down at all, but the recoil of the telegraph post. The engine and carriages had gone over him safely. He

A DEADLY DILEMMA.

wasn't seriously hurt. He was only bruised, and sprained, and jarred, and shaken.

Rising up behind the train as it slackened, he ran hastily along on the off side, towards where Netta lay still unconscious on the line in front of it. Nobody saw him run past; and no wonder either, for every eye was turned toward the near side and the obstruction. A person running fast by the opposite windows was very little likely to attract attention at such a moment. Every step pained him, to be sure, for he was bruised and stiff; but he ran on none the less till he came up at last to where Netta lay. There, he bent over her eagerly. Netta raised her head, opened her eyes, and looked. In a moment the vague sense of a terrible catastrophe averted came somehow over her. She flung her arms around his neck. "Oh, Ughtred, you've come back!" she cried in a torrent of emotion.

"Yes, darling," Ughtred answered, his voice half choked with tears. "I've come back to you now, for ever and ever."

He lifted her in his arms, and carried her some little way off up the left-hand path. His heart was very full. 'Twas a terrible moment. For as yet he hardly knew what harm he might have done by his fatal act. He only knew he had tried his best to undo the wrong

he had half unconsciously wrought; and if the worst came, he would give himself up now like a man to offended justice.

But the worst did not come. Blind Fate had been merciful. Next day the papers were full of the accident to the Great Southern Express; equally divided between denunciation of the miscreant who had placed the obstruction in the way of the train, and admiration for the heroic, but unrecognisable, stranger who had rescued from death so many helpless passengers at so imminent a risk to his own life or safety. Only Ughtred knew that the two were one and the same person. And when Ughtred found out how little harm had been done by his infatuated act—an act he felt he could never possibly explain in its true light to any other person—he thought it wisest on the whole to lay no claim to either the praise or the censure. The world could never be made to understand the terrible dilemma in which he was placed—the one-sided way in which the problem at first presented itself to him—the deadly struggle through which he had passed before he could make up his mind, at the risk of Netta's life, to remove the obstacle. Only Netta understood; and even Netta herself knew no more than this, that Ughtred had risked his own life to save her.



Slap-Bang.

From the French of Jules Claretie.

[JULES CLARETIE was born at Limoges, in 1840, and is still a well-known figure in the literary world of Paris. No man is more prolific : histories, novels, articles, short stories, plays, pour without cessation from his pen. Jules Claretie is a man of the most varied gifts. His best known achievement is his "History of the Revolution," in five volumes—a monumental work. But there are those (and we confess ourselves among them) who would rather be the author of the lovely little story of child-life which we lay before our readers under the title of "Slap-Bang."]

I.

THE little boy lay pale and listless in his small white cot, gazing, with eyes enlarged by fever, straight before him, with the strange fixity of illness which seems to see already more than is visible to living eyes. His mother, sitting at the bottom of the bed, biting her fingers to keep back a cry, noted how the symptoms deepened on the ghostly little face ; while his father, a strong workman, brushed away his burning tears.

The day was breaking ; a calm, clear, lovely day of June. The light began to steal into the poor apartment where little Francis, the son of Jacques and Madeline Legrand, lay very near death's door. He was seven years old ; three weeks ago, a fair-haired, rosy little boy, as happy as a bird. But one night, when he came home from school, his head was giddy and his hands were burning. Ever since he had lain there in his cot. Tonight he did not wander in his mind ; but for two days his strange listlessness had alarmed the doctor. He lay there sad and quiet, as if at seven years old he was already tired of life ; rolling his head upon the bolster, his thin lips never smiling, his eyes staring at one knew not what. He would take nothing — neither medicine, syrup, nor beef-tea.

"Is there anything that you would like ?" they asked him.

"No," he answered, "nothing."

"This must be remedied," the doctor said. "This torpor is alarming. You are his parents, and you know him best. Try to discover what will interest and amuse him." And the doctor went away.

To amuse him ! True, they knew him well, their little Francis. They knew how it delighted him, when he was well, to go into the fields, and to come home, loaded with white hawthorn blossoms, riding on his father's shoulders. Jacques had already bought him gilded soldiers, figures, "Chinese shadows," to be shown upon a screen. He placed them on the sick child's bed, made them dance before his eyes, and, scarcely able to keep back his tears, strove to make him laugh.

"Look, there is the Broken Bridge. Tra-la-la ! And there is a general. You saw one once in the

Bois de Boulogne, don't you remember ? If you drink your medicine like a good boy, I will buy you a real one, with a cloth tunic and gold epaulettes. Would you like to have a general ?"

"No," said the sick child, his voice dry with fever.

"Would you like a pistol and bullets, or a crossbow ?"

"No," replied the little voice, decisively.

And so it was with everything—even with balloons and jumping-jacks. Still, while the parents looked at each other in despair, the little voice responded, "No ! No ! No !"

"But what is there you would like, then, darling ?" said his mother. "Come, whisper to me—to mamma." And she laid her cheek beside him on the pillow.

The sick boy raised himself in bed, and, throwing out his eager hands towards some unseen object, cried out, as in command and in entreaty, "I want Slap-bang !"

II.

"SLAP-BANG !"

The poor mother looked at her husband with a frightened glance. What was the little fellow saying ? Was the terrible delirium coming back again ? "Slap-bang !" She knew not what that signified. She was frightened at the strangeness of the words, which now

the sick boy, with the perversity of illness — as if, having screwed his courage up to put his dream in words, he was resolved to speak of nothing else—repeated without ceasing :

"Slap-bang ! I want Slap-bang !"

"What does he mean ?" she said, distractedly, grasping her husband's hand. "Oh, he is lost !"

But Jacques's rough face wore a smile of wonder and relief, like that of one condemned to death who sees a chance of liberty.

Slap-bang ! He remembered well the morning of Whit-Monday, when he had taken Francis to the circus. He could hear still the child's delighted laughter, when the clown—the beautiful clown, all starstudded with golden spangles, and with a huge, many-coloured butterfly glittering on the back of his black costume—skipped across the track, tripped up the riding-master by the heels, took a walk



"'THIS MUST BE REMEDIED,' THE DOCTOR SAID."

SLAP-BANG.

upon his hands, or threw up to the gas-light the soft felt caps, which he dexterously caught upon his skull, where, one by one, they formed a pyramid ; while at every trick and every jest, his large droll face expanding with a smile, he uttered the same catch-word, sometimes to a roll of music from the band : "Slap-bang ! " And every time he uttered it the audience roared and the little fellow shouted with delight.

Slap-bang ! It was this Slap-bang, the circus clown, he who kept half the city laughing, whom little Francis wished to see, and whom, alas ! he could not see as he lay pale and feeble in his little bed.

That night Jacques brought the child a jointed clown, ablaze with spangles, which he had bought at a high price. Four days' wages would not pay for it ; but he would willingly have given the price of a year's labour, could he have brought a smile to the thin lips of the sick boy.

The child looked for a moment at the toy which sparkled on the bed-quilt. Then he said, sadly, "That is not Slap-bang. I want to see Slap-bang ! "

If only Jacques could have wrapped him in the bed-clothes, borne him to the circus, shown him the clown dancing under the blazing gas-lights, and said, "Look there ! "

But Jacques did better still. He went to the circus, obtained the clown's address, and then, with legs tottering with nervousness and agitation, climbed slowly up the stairs which led to the great man's apartment. It was a bold task to undertake ! Yet actors, after all, go sometimes to recite or sing at rich men's houses. Who knew but that the clown, at any price he liked, would consent to go to say good-day to little Francis ? If so, what matter his reception ?

But was *this* Slap-bang, this charming person, called Monsieur Moreno, who received him in his study like a doctor, in the midst of books and pictures, and all the luxury of art ? Jacques looked at him, and could not recognise the clown. He turned and twisted his felt hat between his fingers. The other waited. At last the poor fellow began to stammer out excuses : "It was unpardonable—a thing unheard-of—that he had come to ask ; but the fact was, it was about his little boy—such a pretty little boy, sir ! and so clever ! Always

—"as you may see by the fact that he wants to see you, that he thinks of nothing else, that you are before him always, like a star which he has set his mind on—"

Jacques stopped. Great beads stood on his forehead and his face was very pale. He dared not look at the clown, whose eyes were fixed upon him. What had he dared to ask the great Slap-bang ? What if the latter took him for a madman, and showed him the door ?

"Where do you live ?" demanded Slap-bang.

"Oh ! close by. The Rue des Abbesses ! "

"Come !" said the other ; "the little fellow wants to see Slap-bang—well, he shall see him."

III.

WHEN the door opened before the clown, Jacques cried out joyfully, "Cheer up, Francis ! Here is Slap-bang."

The child's face beamed with expectation. He raised himself upon his mother's arm, and turned his head towards the two men as they entered. Who was the gentleman in an overcoat beside his father, who smiled good-naturedly, but whom he did not know ? "Slap-bang," they told him. It was all in vain. His head fell slowly back upon the pillow, and his great, sad blue eyes seemed to look out again beyond the narrow chamber walls, in search, unceasing search, of the spangles and the buttery of the Slap-bang of his dreams.

"No," he said, in a voice which sounded inconsolable ; "no, this is not Slap-bang ! "

The clown, standing by the little bed, looked gravely down upon the child with a regard of infinite kind-heartedness. He shook his head, and looking at the anxious father and the mother in her agony, said smiling, "He is right. This is not Slap-bang." And he left the room.

"I shall not see him ; I shall never see him again," said the child, softly.

But all at once—half an hour had not elapsed since the clown had disappeared—the door was sharply opened, and behold, in his black spangled tunic, the yellow tuft upon his head, the golden butterfly upon his breast and back, a large smile opening his mouth like a



"BRAVO, SLAP-BANG ! "

first in his class—except in arithmetic, which he did not understand. A dreamy little chap—too dreamy—as you may see"—Jacques stopped and stammered ; then screwing up his courage he continued with a rush

money-box, his face white with flour, Slap-bang, the true Slap-bang, the Slap-bang of the circus, burst into view. And in his little white cot, with the joy of life in his eyes, laughing, crying, happy, saved, the little fellow

clapped his feeble hands, and, with the recovered gaiety of seven years old, cried out :—

“Bravo ! Bravo, Slap-bang ! It is he this time ! This is Slap-bang ! Long live Slap-bang ! Bravo !”

IV.

WHEN the doctor called that day, he found, sitting beside the little patient's pillow, a white-faced clown, who kept him in a constant ripple of laughter, and who

The poor parents were both crying ; but this time it was with joy.

From that time till little Francis was on foot again, a carriage pulled up every day before the lodging of the workman in the Rue des Abbesses ; a man descended, wrapped in a greatcoat with the collar turned up to his ears, and underneath arrayed as for the circus, with his gay visage white with flour.

“What do I owe you, sir ?” said Jacques to



“THANK YOU, SLAP-BANG.”

was observing, as he stirred a lump of sugar at the bottom of a glass of cooling drink :—

“You know, Francis, if you do not drink your medicine, you will never see Slap-bang again.”

And the child drank up the draught.

“Is it not good ?”

“Very good. Thank you, Slap-bang.”

“Doctor,” said the clown to the physician, “do not be jealous, but it seems to me that my tomfooleries have done more good than your prescriptions.”

the good clown, on the day when Francis left the house for the first time. “For I really owe you everything !”

The clown extended to the parents his two hands, huge as those of Hercules.

“A shake of the hand,” he said. Then, kissing the little boy on both his rosy cheeks, he added, laughing, “And permission to inscribe on my visiting cards, ‘Slap-bang, doctor-acrobat, physician in ordinary to little Francis !’”



The Minister's Crime.

By J. Maclaren Cobban.

I.

"THERE is really little use in my continuing to call," said the doctor; "it will only be running you into useless expense. I may go on prescribing and prescribing till I get through the whole pharmacopœia, but I can do him no good; what he needs is not drugs but air—a bracing air. Get him out of this, and let him run wild in the country, or—if your engagements won't let you get to the country—remove to some open suburb, north or south."

The doctor sat in a little parlour, in a shabby-genteel street of close-packed middle London. Opposite him was the patient, a child of three or four, on his mother's knee and clasped about with his mother's arms, while his father, the Rev. James Murray, stood anxiously listening. The boy—the first-born, and the only child of his parents—had a month or two before been stricken down with an infant's ailment, and though that had passed, he continued so weak that the doctor had tested the soundness of heart and lungs, and the outcome of his examination was that the only hope for the child was change of air.

"I only wish," said the father, "that I could take him away. I must try, though I don't see at present how I am to do it."

He turned away to the window to hide the emotion that would rise to choke him when he met the large, weary blue eyes of his boy bent on him, as if in appeal that he might not be allowed to fade and wither and die, like a flower before it has fairly bloomed.

"Can't you at least send the boy away with his mother?" asked the doctor.

"I must try," said the father, without turning round. "I must see what can be done."

"In the meantime," said the doctor, rising, "go on with the cod-liver oil and malt extract."

The doctor went, and still the Rev. James Murray stood by the window, striving to keep down the emotion that demanded to have its way. The wife rose with the child in her arms and went close to her husband,

"James, my dear," said she in a low voice (and she took his hand), "don't, my dear!"

James turned with the impulse of all his passionate love for his wife and child, and drew them together to his breast and bent his head over them. And one great sob of anguish broke from him, and one tear of bitter agony sprang in his eye, and fell hot upon his wife's hand.

"Oh, James, my darling!" she cried, clinging to him. "Don't! God will be good to us!"

They stood thus for some seconds, while no sound was

heard but the loud ticking of the cheap lodging-house clock on the mantelpiece. The wife sobbed a little in sympathy with her husband; not that she considered at all how her own heart was wrung, but that she felt how his was. Seeing and hearing her, he recovered himself.

"Come, my dear," said he, "this does no good. Let us sit down, and see what can be arranged."

He led her back to her seat. He sat down beside her, transferred the boy to his own lap, and held her hand.

"Come now, Jim," said he to

his boy, "how am I going to get you and your mammy to the country, eh?"

"Daddy come, too," said the child, putting his arm about his father's neck.

"I would, Jim, I would," said he, with the faintest suspicion of a painful catch in his voice still; "but I have no money. And I don't know how mammy and you are to go, unless some kind friend offers to take you in."

"Oh, James, dear!" exclaimed the wife, impulsively, catching her husband's hand to her cheek. "It's I who have taken you from kind friends! I am a burden to you, and nothing but a burden!"

"My dear wife," said he, bending to her, "you are the sweetest burden that man could bear, and I'd rather have you than all else the world could give."

"It's beautiful, my dear," said she, "to hear you say so. It's like sweet music to me; but it's not true. If you had married another—if you had married differently,



THE DOCTOR'S VISIT.

and as you were expected to have married—you would not be here now; and if you had a sick boy, like our dear, poor Jim, there would have been no difficulty in getting to the country, or in getting anything that was needed for him! But you married me, and—my poor, dear love!—you bear the penalty!"

"Mary," said he, with a certain touch of solemnity in his voice; "I have not for one instant regretted that we loved each other, and married each other, and, whatever may come, I shall not regret it. The complete love of a woman like you is more precious than rubies. Your love, my darling"—and he caressed the head crowned with a glory of bright hair—"is the joy of my life—God forgive me!"

She drew again his hand to her cheek, and pressed it there, and said no more. And so they sat for a few seconds longer, while the vulgar, intrusive clock, with a kind of limp in its noisy tick, seemed to say, "*It's time! It's time!*"

Let us take the opportunity of this pause to explain how the Reverend James Murray got into the anxious position in which we find him. He was a minister of a well-known denomination of Nonconformists. When he left college he had been reckoned a young man of great promise and of considerable powers of persuasive eloquence, and he was expected to become a famous preacher. He was invited to be the minister of a large and wealthy congregation in a northern manufacturing town. He accepted the invitation, and for two or three years he was a great favourite with his people; never, they declared, had they heard so fine a preacher (though he was sometimes so "fine" that they did not understand him), and never had they known a better man. His praise was in everybody's mouth; the men admired him and the women adored him. But he was a bachelor, and there was not an unmarried lady in the congregation who did not aspire to be his wife, which put him in the awkward and invidious position of having to prefer one out of many. He astonished and offended all the well-to-do ladies by falling in love with and marrying the pretty, shy governess of one of the wealthiest families—a girl who had not been regarded as having the smallest chance of occupying the proud position of minister's wife. His marriage alienated the women, and through them cooled the ardour of the men. The situation was strained; but it might have gradually returned to its former easy condition, had not the minister soon after his marriage become what is termed "broad" in his religious views and uncompromising in his expression of them. His people grew alarmed, and his deacons remonstrated—with less friendliness of feeling, probably, than if he had not offended them by his marriage; but the minister declared he could not do otherwise than preach what he believed to be the truth. Then some people left him, and others would not speak to him, and his position became so difficult and

resolved to labour among "the masses"; if the arrogant and wealthy people of the north would not hear him, he was sure the poor of London, bending beneath the weary burden of life, would hear him gladly. He had not been in London long when he became minister of a venerable, half-deserted chapel in one of those curiously quiet corners made by the rushing currents and the swirling eddies of the life of our huge metropolis. It was close to the heart of London, and yet no one knew it was there but the handful of small shop-keepers and their families and the few devout and destitute old women who made up its congregation. These poor people were fluttered with pride when they got so clever and beautiful a preacher for their own; they looked to see ere long the old chapel crowded with an attentive congregation as it had been in other days; and the chapel-keeper (who was also a painter) had put all the magnificent hopes of himself and his friends in the fresh inscription he made on the faded notice-board in the fore-court: "MINISTER, THE REV. JAMES MURRAY, M.A." in letters of gold.

A year had passed since then, and the minister's heart was sad. He had spent himself for the benefit of the poor that sheltered round that old chapel, and the poor did not seem to want him or his ministrations any more than the wealthy: they would gather round him if he spread a tea for them, but they would not come to hear him preach; so the chapel remained as empty as when he first ascended its pulpit. Most harassing and wearing anxiety of all, he was desperately poor. How he and his wife and child had lived during the year it would be difficult to tell; from the treasurer of the chapel funds he had received less than sixty pounds, and he was in debt for his lodgings, in debt to the doctor, his and his wife's clothes were becoming painfully shabby, and his child was sick unto death.

What now was to be done?

"If I had only two or three pounds in hand," said he, "or if I could raise them, I could send you and Jim away to some quiet seaside place; but everything is gone—everything!"

"Don't be cast down, my dear," said his wife, raising her head, and bravely smiling. "It is always darkest and coldest before the dawn. Something may come to us just when we least expect it."

"I am angry with myself," said he, "for being so cast down; but I can't help it. I care nothing for myself—nothing at all, you know, Mary: I have good health, and I can live on little. It's seeing you, my dear, and poor little Jim, going without things you ought to have, that goes to my heart; and to know now that the boy's life would be saved if I could do something which I have no hope of doing!—oh! it maddens me! I ask myself over and over again if I've done wrong to anyone that we should be at this desperate pass!"

"My dear, dear husband!" exclaimed his wife, again caressing his hand. "You do wrong to anyone? You could not hurt a fly! We must be patient and brave, my dear, and bear it. And Jim, poor boy, may really be improving: doctors sometimes make mistakes."

But it needed only to look at the child's thin, limp figure, his transparent skin, and his large, sad, lustreless eyes, to be convinced that there the doctor had made no mistake. The boy would die unless he could be taken into the fresh, stimulating air of the seaside or the country. The parents glanced at the boy, and then looked involuntarily each into the sad face of the other, and turned their heads away.

At that moment there came a loud, double "rat-tat" at the street door, which made them both jump. Their sitting-room was on the ground-floor. The minister rose, pale and expectant. He heard no one coming to answer the summons.

"I wonder if it's for me?" he said.

"Go and see," said his wife.

He went into the passage and opened the door.

"Murray?" said the telegraph-boy, and, on being answered "Yes," handed a reply-paid telegram.



"THE PRETTY GOVERNESS."

finally so unbearable, that he could do nothing but send in his resignation. He shook the dust and the grime of that northern town off his feet, and with sore heart and slender purse journeyed to London. He was

THE MINISTER'S CRIME.

The minister's fingers trembled so, he could scarcely tear the envelope open. He took the telegram in to his wife and read it aloud:—

*"Can you supply Upton Chapel on Sunday next?
Letter to follow."*

That was all, with the name and address of the sender appended. Both the minister and his wife knew the Upton Chapel, and perceived at once that this was the most hopeful thing that had happened to them for more than a year.

"Yes," wrote the minister on his reply-form, which he handed to the telegraph-boy.

"Thank God for that, Mary," said he, when he returned to her. "Now I can send you and Jim away for at least a week! Thank God, my dear!"

He kissed her, and then set himself in his agitation to walk up and down the little room.

"That will mean five pounds for us, I believe. I don't want to count the fee I shall get, but I can't help it now. It's a rich congregation, and I think I must get that. And, Mary," he went on, "what if they should ask me to be their minister? You know they are without one. Perhaps the 'letter to follow' will say something. Upton is a beautiful, bracing suburb, and Jim—our own little Jim!"—here he raised him in his arms—"would get strong there!"

"Ah, my dear," said his wife, "it is too tempting. I am afraid to hope. But I am sure when once they hear you they will like you. Now let us think: what sermons will you take?"

II.

THE "letter to follow" came by a late post, but it was only a fuller and politer version of the telegram. It hoped that Mr. Murray would be able to give the Upton congregation the pleasure of listening to him, it apologized for the short notice (it was then Friday), and it invited the minister to dine with the writer on Sunday. It thus gave no hint that the eye of the Upton congregation might be on Mr. Murray, but at the same time it did not completely dash the hope that it might be.

On Saturday the minister sat down and wrote one sermon expressly for the occasion, and with that and another in his pocket he set off on Sunday morning to fulfil his engagement with some trepidation.

The aspect of the Upton Chapel was itself cheerful and inspiriting. It was nearly new, and it was large and handsome in a semi-Gothic, open-raftered style; moreover, it was well filled, without being crowded. It was a complete contrast to the place where Mr. Murray usually ministered, where most of the high-backed, musty pews were quite empty, where a kind of fog hung perpetually, and where the minister, perched aloft in the pulpit, was as "a voice crying in the wilderness." Then in the Upton Chapel there was a fine organ, and good singing by a well-trained choir. When the minister, therefore, rose to preach his sermon, it was with a sense of exaltation and inspiration which he had not felt for years. He delivered himself with effect, and he was listened to with wakeful attention and apparent appreciation. When the service was over, and one leader of the congregation after another came to the vestry to shake him warmly by the hand and to

thank him for his "beautiful discourse," he thanked God and took courage, and wished that his Mary were with him, instead of sitting lonely and anxious in their little lodging with their sick boy.

He went in good spirits to the home of his host, who was a merchant in the City, and he sat down with the family to the ample Sunday dinner. He sat next his hostess, a gentle, motherly lady, who asked him if he was married, and if he had any children; and he told her of Mary and the child. His host was a shrewd man, of middle age, who had clearly read much and thought a good deal, and all his family (three grown sons and two daughters) were intelligent and cultivated, and took a modest but sufficient share in the conversation of the table, and all listened to such opinions as the minister uttered with attention and understanding. Mr. Murray, therefore, felt he was in a sociable, frank, and refined atmosphere, and he thought within himself: "What a place of brightness and pleasant endeavour this would be after my rude and stormy experience of the north and this terrible year in London! And, oh, what a haven of rest and health for my darling wife and boy!"

So it was with unaffected joy, when he walked round the large garden with his host after dinner, that he heard him say:—

"I think, Mr. Murray, absolute frankness in these matters is best. Let me ask you, if you were invited to become our minister, would you be willing? Would you like to come to us?"

"As frankly as you put the question," said Mr. Murray, "I answer that, from all I know and have seen of the Upton congregation, I *should* like to be your minister. Of course, it would be pleasanter for me and for all if the invitation were as nearly unanimous as may be."

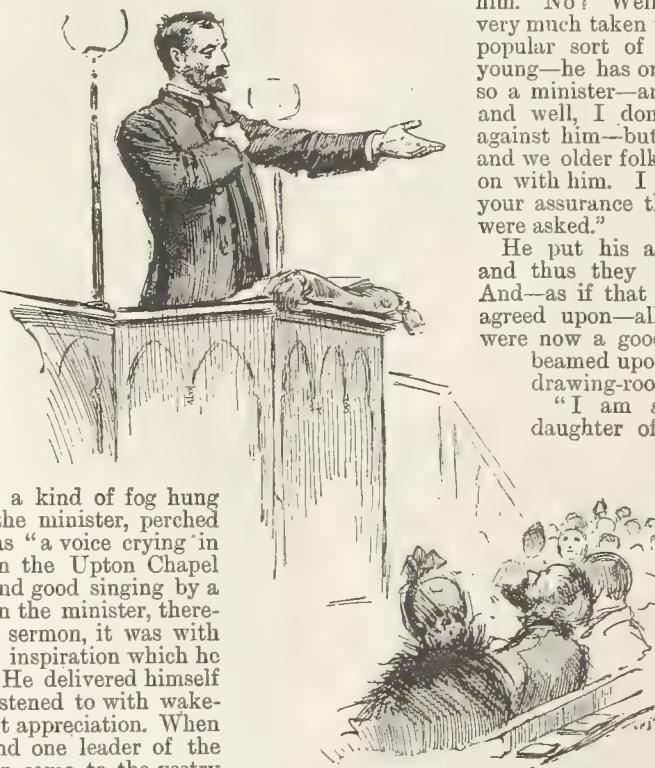
"Quite so," said his host. "I ought to say that, though I am the chairman, I have at present no authority to speak for any but myself and my family. But we have heard a good report of you, Mr. Murray, and I know that many of our people have been much impressed by you this morning." Then, unconsciously, he went on to dash somewhat the minister's lively hopes. "There is a young man—Mr. Lloyd: you may know him. No? Well—some of our people are very much taken with him. He is a brilliant, popular sort of young fellow; but he *is* young—he has only been some two years or so a minister—and he is unmarried, and—and well, I don't want to say anything against him—but he is just a *little* flighty, and we older folk doubt how we should get on with him. I am glad, however, to have your assurance that you would come if you were asked."

He put his arm within the minister's, and thus they returned into the house. And—as if that had been a sign of consent agreed upon—all the company (and there were now a good many guests assembled) beamed upon them as they entered the drawing-room.

"I am so glad," said the eldest daughter of the house, bringing Mr. Murray a cup of tea and sitting down by him, "to know that you are willing to be our minister!"

"How do you know I am?" he asked, with a smile.

"Oh," she answered, with a blush and a little laugh, "we arranged for a sign from my father, so that we should all know at once. You are willing, are you not?"



HE DELIVERED HIMSELF WITH EFFECT."

"I am," he answered, "quite."

"And I hope—I do hope—you will be asked."

Presently there came to him an unknown young man, who said :—

"I don't often go to chapel or church, but if you often preach sermons like this morning's, I should always go to hear you, I think."

That was a flattering tribute, and the minister showed his appreciation of it.

"Well, I confess," he said, "it is at least pleasant to hear you say so."

Thus the time passed till the hour came for evening service. The gas was lit, and floor and galleries were crowded with people. The minister had chosen a simple and pathetic theme for his evening discourse : "He took little children in His arms and blessed them"; and he spoke out of the fulness of experience and with the tender feeling of the father of a sick child, insomuch that all were moved, many even to sobs and tears. There was no doubt that he carried his audience with him; and, as in the morning, he had to shake many hands and receive many thanks.

Last of all, his host of the day came and asked him to take also the services of the next Sunday; and then he hastened home by train to his wife with hopeful, grateful heart.

"There, Mary, my dear," said he, giving her the £5 note in an envelope as it had been slipped into his hand ; "that's for you and Jim. I'll take you both down to Margate to-morrow—the air of Margate is the most bracing in England—and you can stay for two or three weeks at least, and the boy will begin to grow strong."

For answer Mary threw herself into her husband's arms, and sobbed upon his breast.

"Oh, how good God is, James ! Let us be thankful, my dear ! Oh, let us be thankful, my dear !"

Next day the minister took his wife and child to Margate, and placed them in lodgings on the breezy cliff-top. On Tuesday he returned to town ; for he had much to do to prepare for his second Sunday at Upton and to fill the vacancy at the old, deserted chapel. In spite of his occupation he began, before the week was out, to feel lonely and depressed ; for he and his wife had not separated before, save for a day or two, since the hour of their marriage. In the solitude of his close and dingy lodging he restlessly and morbidly meditated on his desire to go to Upton, and his chances of going. Had he any right to go, with such mercenary motives as moved him ? But was the health of wife and child a mercenary motive ? Was the desire to see them free from a narrow and blighting poverty a mercenary motive ? And had he not other motives also—motives of truth and duty ? If it was wrong to seek to go to Upton for these reasons, then God forgive him ! for he could not help longing to go !

It was in something of that depressed and troubled mood that he went to fulfil his second Sunday. The congregation was larger than on the previous Sunday morning, and the minister felt that many must have come expressly to hear him ; and, therefore, he had less brightness and freedom of delivery than on the Sunday before. He felt, when the service was over, that he had not acquitted himself well, and he began anew to torture himself with the thoughts of what would become of Mary and Jim if he should miss his chance of Upton.

To add discomfort to discomfort, and constraint to constraint, he was introduced in the vestry to the Reverend Mr. Lloyd—his rival, as he felt bound to consider him ; and to his host for the day—a stout, loud-spoken, rather vulgar-looking man, who dropped his "h's."

When they reached the home of his host (who clearly was a wealthy man, for the house was large and furnished with substantial splendour), he discovered that his rival also was to be a guest. That did not serve to put him more at his ease, the less that he perceived host and rival seemed on very friendly, if not familiar, terms. They called one another "Lloyd" and "Brown," and

slapped each other on the back. "Brown" said something, and "Lloyd" flatly and boisterously contradicted and corrected him, and then "Brown" laughed loudly, and seemed to like it. Thus dinner wore away, while Mr. Murray said little save to his hostess—a pale, thin, and somewhat depressed woman, grievously overburdened, it was clear, with a "jolly" husband, and a loud and healthy young family. After dinner "Lloyd" romped and rolled in and out of the house with the troop of noisy children, while Mr. Murray kept his hostess and her very youngest company, and the attention of his host was divided between duty and inclination—the duty of sitting by his wife and guest, and the inclination of "larking with 'Lloyd.'"

"Look at him !" he exclaimed once. "Isn't he a jolly fellow ? I do think he's a capital fellow ! Oh, yes ; and he has a nice mind."



"ISN'T HE A JOLLY FELLOW ?"

It was all very depressing and saddening to Mr. Murray, though he appeared only to be very quiet. For he thought : "A large congregation like this of Upton must necessarily have more people like these Browns than like my friends of last Sunday ; and it must, therefore, needs be that this Mr. Lloyd—who has no harm in him, I daresay, but who is little more than a rough, noisy, presumptuous boy not long from school—it must be that he should be preferred by the majority to me. I may as well, then, give up all hope of coming here. But what, then, of Mary and the boy—the boy ?"

He was scarcely more satisfied with himself after the evening service (though he held the attention again of a crowded congregation), and he went back to his lonely lodging with a sore and doubting heart. He wrote, however, cheerfully (he thought) to his wife ; but next day she replied to his letter and showed that his assumed cheerfulness had not deceived the watchful sense of love.

"You are not in good spirits, my dear," she wrote ; "don't pretend you are. If you are not better to-day I shall come home to you, though little Jim is beginning to show the benefit of the change."

"Poor little chap !" the father thought. "He is beginning to improve. They must not come back, and I must not go down to them. My glum face would frighten Mary, and I should have to tell her all my fears. Besides, I cannot afford it. Oh, that it might be settled I'm to go to Upton !"

That was the refrain of his thoughts all that day. "Oh, that I might go to Upton !" It was a kind of prayer, and surely as worthy a prayer, and springing from as pure and loving a desire as any prayer that is uttered. He could do nothing more, however, to attain the desired end ; he could only wait. Monday passed, and Tuesday, and still no word from Upton. On Wednesday came a letter from his first host—the Chairman of Committee. It contained little, but that little was charged with meaning and anxiety for the minister. Nothing, it declared, was yet absolutely decided ; but on Thursday evening there was to be held

THE MINISTER'S CRIME.

a certain debate in the Lecture-room, in which it had been resolved that both Mr. Murray and Mr. Lloyd should be asked to take part.

"I am not officially instructed," continued the writer, "to say this to you, but I think I ought to tell you that there is a disposition among a good many to form their final choice, for you or for Mr. Lloyd, on the conclusion of the debate."

III.

It was put gently and carefully, but the meaning of the communication to the minister plainly was that it had come to a contest between him and the young Mr. Lloyd, and that whichever should acquit himself in this debate most to the satisfaction and admiration of the audience would straightway be chosen as minister.

It was a terrible situation for the minister—how terrible none but himself knew, and none, not even the wife of his bosom, could ever sufficiently understand. He was a bad debater, and, worse than that, he was the most nervous, hesitating, and involved extempore speaker in the world. His sermons and discourses were always written, but he delivered them so well that very few would have guessed that he had manuscript before him. With his writing in his hand he was easy, vigorous, and self-possessed; but when he had to speak extempore a panic of fear shook him; he had neither ideas nor words, and he was completely lost.

It was simply a question of nerves with him, and whenever he knew beforehand that he was expected to speak extempore the strain upon him was crueler than man can tell. The strain imposed now upon a body weakened by the past year's privations and anxiety could not have been crueler if he had been under sentence of death; and, indeed, life or death seemed to his over-wrought nerves to hang upon the issue. If he failed—and he feared he would fail, fail signally, for he did not doubt but that the young and boisterous Mr. Lloyd was without nerves, and was a glib and self-confident talker—then Upton was lost, and his wife was condemned for Heaven alone knew how long to grievous poverty, and his child to a lingering death. If he succeeded—but he had no reason to hope he would—then Upton was won, and with it life and health and happiness for those he loved.

It was Wednesday morning when he got the letter, and all that day he considered, with a frequent feeling of panic at the heart, and a constant fluttering of the nerves, what he could possibly do to insure success. He thought he would write down something on the subject of the debate, and commit it to memory. He had sat down and written a little, when he bethought him that he did not know when he would be called upon to speak, nor whether he might not have to expressly answer someone. He threw down the pen, and groaned in despair; there was nothing to be done; he must trust to the inspiration and self-possession of the moment.

When he went to bed his sleep was a succession of ghastly nightmares. He dreamt his wife and child were struggling and choking in a dark and slimy sea, that Mr. Lloyd stood aloof unconcernedly looking on, and that he, the husband and father, lay unable to stir hand or foot or tongue! Then he awoke with a sharp cry, trembling with dread and bathed in perspiration, and found, lo! it was but a dream!

So the night passed and the day came with its constant wearing fear and anxiety. He could not eat, he could not drink, he could not rest; and thus the day

passed and the hour came when he must set out for the fatal meeting. As he passed along the street people paused to glance at him: he appeared so pale and scared.

When he entered the Lecture-room at Upton he was met by his friend, the Chairman of Committee, who looked at him and said:—

"Don't you feel well, Mr. Murray? You look very faint and pale. Let me get you a glass of wine."

"No, thank you," said the minister. "I am really quite well."

"We shall have a good debate, I think," said his friend, then leading the way forward.

"I hope so," said the minister, "though I am afraid I can do little; I am the worst extempore speaker you can imagine."

"Is that so?" The friend turned quickly and considered him. "I should not have thought so. Ah, well, never mind."

But the minister felt that his friend's hope of his success was considerably shaken.

The chief persons of the assembly were gathered about a table at the upper end of the room. The chairman introduced the matter for debate; one man rose, and spoke on the affirmative side, and another rose and spoke on the negative. The minister listened, but he scarce knew what was said; he drank great gulps of water to moisten his parched mouth (which, for all the water, remained obstinately dry), and he felt his hour was come. He glanced round him, but saw only shadows of men. One only he saw—the man opposite him, the very young and boisterous Mr. Lloyd, who clapped his hands and lustily said "Hear, hear!" when anything was said of which he approved or which he wished to deride. The minister's eyes burned upon him till he seemed to assume threatening, demoniac proportions as the boastful and blatant Apollyon whom Christian fought in the Valley.

At length young Mr. Lloyd rose, large and hairy, and then the minister listened with all his ears. He missed nothing the young man uttered—none of the foolish and ignorant opinions, none of the coarse and awkward phrases—and as he listened amazement seized him, and then anger, and he said to himself: "This is the man, this is the conceited and ignorant smatterer, who would supplant me, and rob my wife and child of health and happiness!" He rose at once in his anger to answer him, to smash and pulverize him. What he said in his anger he did not know; but when he had finished he sat down and buried his face in his hands and was sure



THE DEBATE.

he had made an egregious ass of himself. He felt very faint and drank more water, and it was all over. In a dazed and hurried fashion he said his adieu and went away to the train, convinced he should never see Upton more.

He had entered a carriage and sunk back with body exhausted, but with brain on fire; the train was starting, when the door was flung open and Mr. Lloyd burst in and sat down opposite him.

"Halloo!" he cried. "I did *not* think to find you here. What a splendid debate it was, wasn't it?" He did not wait for an answer, but hurried on in his loquacity, "I think I woke them up. They need waking up, and I'll do it when I'm their minister."

It clearly did not occur to him that his *vis-à-vis* might be minister instead; and Mr. Murray, in his exaggerated dread and humility, thought that the question who was to be minister must really have been settled before the young man left. Mr. Murray said nothing, but that did not embarrass Mr. Lloyd.

"I shall soon settle," he continued, "the hash of some of those frightened old fogies who want things to go on in the old, humdrum way. It's a fine place, and a magnificent chapel, and can be made a popular cause; and I'll make it, too, when I'm among them. Good, rousing, popular stuff—that's the thing to make a success; don't you think so, Murray?"

"No doubt," said Murray, scarce knowing or caring what he said in his bitterness and despair; "only make noise enough."

Young Mr. Lloyd merely laughed boisterously, and Mr. Murray only kept saying to himself: "This is the man who has robbed me of my chance, and my wife and child of health and happiness! But for this ignorant, conceited, and incompetent braggart *I* should be minister!"

An incontrollable dislike—and in his nervous, overstrained condition, hatred even—rose in him against the young man.

As Lloyd went on with his ding-dong, maddening talk, Mr. Murray, who could have cried aloud in his pain and despair of the loss he believed he had endured, observed absently that the inner handle of the door showed that the catch was open. The train slowed down, for some reason, in the middle of a tunnel, and Lloyd rose in his lusty, boisterous way, banged down the window, and looked out.

"The trains," quoth he, "are confoundedly slow."

Mr. Murray kept his eye on the brass handle of the door. It was a dangerous position for Mr. Lloyd; if he leaned too heavily, or if the train went on with a jerk, he was likely to be thrown out. Should he warn him? Should he say, "Take care: you may fall, in your rashness"? Yet why did not the foolish, unobservant young man see for himself the condition of the door?

Still, the handle of the door fascinated the minister's eye, and he kept silence. At that moment the train started off again with a jerk and a screech; the door swung open, and Lloyd fell, and as the minister put out his hands and head to catch him, with a horrified "Oh!" he saw the fiery eye of a train rushing down

upon him from the opposite direction. It came on with thunderous roar and passed, and the minister sank back in the carriage alone, and fainted!

IV.

He came to himself only outside the London terminus at which he had to arrive, when the train drew up, and a man came along for the collection of tickets. In a half-dazed condition (which the ticket-collector probably considered intoxication) he surrendered his ticket without a word, and then the train went on, and presently he was on the platform, stumbling out of the station on his way home, but no more in touch with the people and things he passed among than a man in a dream.

What had he done? What had he done? To what a depth of misery and infamy had he cast himself? It was impossible to sound the black bottom of it.

"*I have slain a man to my wounding; a young man to my hurt.*"

The old words rose in his mind unbidden—rose and sank, rose and sank again. He felt that the young man must be lying crushed across those rails. And it was his doing: he had not warned the young man of his danger; he had consented to his death, and, therefore, he had killed him! Oh, the horror! Oh, the pity of it!

When he reached his lonely lodging it was late, and he was dull and tired. He was conscious of having walked a long way round, and to and fro, but where he did not know. The strain was now off his nerves, and dull, dead misery was upon him. He mechanically undressed, and went to bed and sank to sleep at once; but his sleep was unrefreshing: it was troubled all the night through with alarms and terrors, with screeching and roaring trains, and falling bodies; and when in the morning he was fully awake, his misery settled upon him like a dense fog of death.

The morning postman brought a letter from his wife. She was in good spirits, and the boy was improving rapidly. Then tears—bitter, bitter tears!—came to his relief, and he sobbed in agony. What had possessed him? What fiend of anger and hate had entered into him to make him commit that deed? He was aghast at the atrocious possibilities of his own nature. He felt as if he could not look in the face of his wife again, or again venture to take her in his arms. Would she not shrink from him with horror when she knew? And would not his boy—his little Jim!—when he grew up (if he ever grew up) be ashamed of the father who had so dishonoured his name?

"Oh, my God!" he cried in his misery and grief. "Let me bear the utmost punishment of my sin, but spare them! Punish not the innocent with the guilty! Let my dear wife and child live in peace and honour before Thee!"

He could not eat a morsel of breakfast—he had scarcely tasted food or drink for two whole days—and he could not rest in the lodgings. He wandered out with his load of misery upon him. He was a man who seldom read the newspapers, and he did not think of buying one now, nor did it even occur to him to scan the contents-bills set outside the newsvendors' shops. He merely wandered on and round, revolving the horrible business that had brought him so low, and then he wandered back in the afternoon faint with exhaustion.

When he entered the sitting-room he saw a letter set for him on the mantelpiece. It was from his friend at Upton, and it declared with delight that, after the stirring debate on Thursday evening, he (Murray) had been "unanimously elected" minister. That was the most unlooked-for stroke of retribution! To think that he had committed his sin—nay, his crime!—in headlong wantonness! To think that at the very moment when he had committed it he was being elected to the place which he had believed the young man had been chosen to fill! Bitter, bitter was his punishment beginning to be; for, of course, he could not, with the stain of crime on his soul if not on his hands, accept the place—not even to save his wife and child from want!



"THE DOOR SWUNG OPEN."

THE MINISTER'S CRIME.

The writer further said that it was desired he (Murray) should occupy next Sunday the pulpit which was henceforward to be his. What was to be done? Clearly but one thing: at all costs to occupy the pulpit on Sunday morning, to lay bare his soul to the people who had "unanimously" invited him, and to tell them he could never more be minister either there or elsewhere.

He sat thus with the letter in his hand, when the door opened and his wife came, with the boy asleep in her arms; he had omitted to write to her since Wednesday. He rose to his feet and stood back against the fire-place.

"Oh, my poor dear!" she cried when she saw him. "How terribly ill you look! Why didn't you tell me? I felt there was something wrong with you when I had no word." She carefully laid the sleeping child on the couch and returned to embrace her husband.

"Don't, Mary!" said he, keeping her back



"DON'T, MARY!"

"Oh, James, dear!" she said, clasping her hands. "What has gone wrong? You look worn to death!"

"Everything's gone wrong, Mary!" he answered. "My whole life's gone wrong!"

"What do you mean?" she asked, in breathless terror. "What have you in your hand?"

He held out to her the letter, and sat down and covered his face.

"Oh, but this is good news, James!" she exclaimed. "You are elected minister at Upton!"

"I can't go, Mary! I can no longer be minister there or anywhere!"

"James, my darling!" She knelt beside him, and put her arms about him. "Something has happened to you! Tell me what it is!" But he held his peace. "Remember, my dear, that we are all the world to each other; remember that when we were married we said we should never have any secret from each other! Tell me your trouble, my dear!"

He could not resist her appeal: he told her the whole story.

"My poor, dear love!" she cried. "How terribly tried you have been! And I did not know it!"

"And you don't shrink from me, Mary?" said he.

"Shrink from you, my dear husband?" she demanded. "How can you ask me? Oh, my darling!"

She kissed his hands and his face, and covered him with her love and wept over him.

They sat in silence for a while, and then he told her what he proposed to do. She agreed with him that that was the proper thing.

"We must do the first thing that is right, whatever may happen to ourselves. Write and say that you do not feel you can take more than the morning service. I'll go with you, and you shall do as you say—and the rest is with God."

Thus it was arranged. And on Sunday morning they set off together for Upton, leaving the boy in the care of the landlady. They had no word to say to each other in the train, but they held close each other's hand. They avoided greetings and introductions and felicitations save from one or two, by keeping

close in the vestry till the hour struck, and the attendant came to usher the minister to the pulpit. He went out and up the pulpit stairs with a firm step, but his face was very pale, his lips were parched, and his heart was thumping hard, till he felt as if it would burst. The first part of the service was gone through, and the minister rose to deliver his sermon. He gave out his text, "*And Cain said unto the Lord, 'My punishment is greater than I can bear!'*" and glanced round upon the congregation, who sat up wondering what was to come of that. He repeated it, and happening to look down, saw seated immediately below the pulpit, looking as well and self-satisfied as usual, the young man whom he had imagined crushed in the tunnel! The revulsion of feeling was too great; the minister put up his hand to his head, with a cry something between sob and sigh, tottered, and fell back.

There was a flutter and a rustle of dismay throughout the congregation. The minister's wife was up the pulpit stairs in an instant, and she was followed by the chairman and the young Mr. Lloyd. Between them they carried the minister down into the vestry, where a few others presently assembled.

"Will you run for a doctor, Mr. Lloyd?" said the chairman.

Hearing the name "Lloyd," and seeing a man in minister's attire, Mrs. Murray guessed the truth at once.

"I think," said she, "there is no need for a doctor: my husband has only fainted. He has been terribly worried all the year, and the last week or two especially has told on him."

"I thought the other night," said the chairman, "that he looked ill."

"He has not been well since," she said; and she continued, turning to Mr. Lloyd, "I believe he was the more upset that he thought an accident had happened to you in the train, Mr. Lloyd."

"Oh," said the young man, "it was nothing. It really served me right for leaning against a door that was unlatched. I picked myself up all right."

The chairman and the others stared; they clearly had heard nothing of that.

"He is coming round," said the wife. "If someone will kindly get me a cab, I'll take him home."

* * * * *

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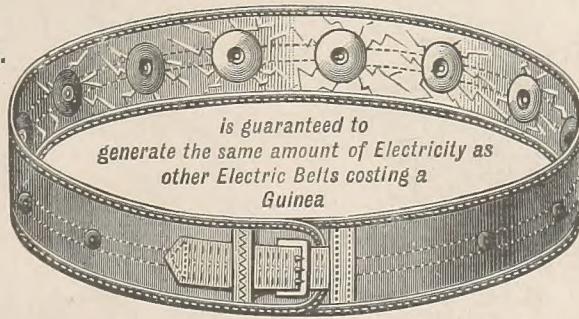


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